

Andrew Horn

Uganda's theatre - the exiled and the dead

If I die today, if I am killed next week, I will die happy. What I have done for Uganda will never be reversed. The history books will know the real independence. They will say it was me.

Idi Amin Dada (1973)

As long as I am king, I will not let anybody be master here in my Kingdom. And if there is such a person, his end has come. Nobody is making me say this; these are my own ideas . . . A ruler who favours a person he does not like is not a good and faithful ruler . . .

Kabaka Mwanga, in *Saint Lwanga*
by Byron Kawadwa

Between independence (1962) and the shattering of civil society amidst the violent anarchy of Idi Amin Dada's arbitrary rule, Uganda enjoyed a decade of the most productive and committed indigenous theatre in East and Central Africa. Interest in drama had begun to develop as early as the 1920s amongst Ugandans; their work gradually displaced that of expatriate amateur groups and emerged in the 1960s as a distinctly local theatrical voice and manner (see my article in *The Literary Half-Yearly* XIX 1 [Jan 1978] pp 22-49).

Under the government of Dr Milton Obote there had been restrictions imposed on what could be staged, screened, and published within Uganda (*Index on Censorship* 2/1979, pp 18-21). As the influence of Obote's paramilitary General Services Unit (GSU) spread, an increasing number of plays, both on television and in the theatre, were denied official clearance and directors grew more careful of the scripts they considered for production. The resulting tension was unexpectedly relieved by the coup of 25 January 1971, which brought Amin to power. The youth, informality, and progressiveness of such newly appointed ministers as Edward Rugumayo (Education) and Wanume Kibedi (Foreign Affairs); the apparently genial earthiness of the new President; the disbanding of the GSU; and the lifting of censorship regulations were

warmly welcomed by the intellectual and artistic community, especially in Kampala and on the campus of Makerere University. There followed a year of almost euphoric cultural activity: plays were written and produced in great numbers; the National Theatre and the Makerere Main Hall were rarely dark; festivals were held, books launched, concerts promoted, the visual and plastic arts exhibited, frank criticism of government policies voiced in broadcast discussions, and all with explicit ministerial encouragement.

As late as October 1972 – while the country's Asian citizens were being mercilessly dispossessed – Obote's *Common Man's Charter* could still be found in bookshops and *Newsweek* with its cover story on 'Uganda: Where Terror Reigns', was openly hawked in the streets. But, as official violence visibly increased and the numbers of the 'disappeared' could no longer be accounted for by government tales of marauding *kondos* (armed robbers), it became clear that the apparent liberalism of Amin's administration was not so much policy as an absence of policy; not enlightened reformism, but unfocused despotism. The fact that it took well over a year for the regime to begin in earnest the harassment of artists and intellectuals reveals only that the new military elite, with its notable lack of educated personnel and its preoccupation with opposition within its own armed ranks, saw no immediate threat in what seemed only the distracting pastimes of a quiescent citizenry. In fact, the victimisation of artists in Uganda was often less the result of creative activities than of elemental greed and jealousy on the part of members of the Army, the Public Safety Unit (PSU), and the State Research Bureau (SRB).

The dead

While many in Uganda's theatre community died at the hands of Amin's various security agencies, none was more widely celebrated and respected than the 37-year-old playwright and director Byron

Kawadwa. Active in theatre since secondary school, Kawadwa – with his former teacher Wycliffe Kiyingi and the gifted musician Wassanyi Serukenya – created a popular audience for drama by developing an accessible form of musical play; performing in Luganda (the main language in the region of the capital), against local settings, and establishing a professional standard for his large and meticulously rehearsed casts. In 1964, he founded the Kampala City Players, whose members, employed during the day in commerce and the Civil Service, gave long evenings to the theatre. Two years later, during the Emergency declared after Obote's republican confrontation with the hereditary Kabaka of Buganda, Kawadwa, then on the staff of Radio Uganda, was arrested and detained without trial at Luzira prison. Upon his release, he found he could not reclaim his broadcasting post and turned to the theatre and to commercial advertising to sustain a living. In carefully crafted plays, like *Makula ga Kulabako* ('Beautiful One') and *Oluyimba Iwa Wankoko* ('Wankoko's Song'), Kawadwa combined acute social observation, a deep affection for the culture of his native Buganda, a keen sense of stage spectacle, and Serukenya's rich musical scores for traditional Kiganda instruments, to produce neatly patterned romantic comedies. *Kulabako* drew the largest audiences ever recorded at Uganda's National Theatre.

In 1976, *Wankoko* was selected to represent Uganda at the Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture (FESTAC), in Nigeria. The production was revised and remounted under the direction of playwright Elvania Zirimu, and performed to appreciative international audiences in Lagos. But on 5 February 1977, while Kawadwa and his company were still in Nigeria, Anglican Archbishop Janani Luwum was arrested and murdered in Kampala, precipitating world-wide protests against religious persecution in Uganda. Some eight months earlier, Kawadwa had sought – and reportedly received – official approval from the President's Office to revive his *Saint Lwanga*, first produced for the 1969 visit of Pope Paul VI. The play commemorates the martyrdom of 22 young Baganda Roman Catholics, burnt to death in 1885 by Kabaka Mwanga at the urging of his Arab adviser, Salim bin Juma. When Kawadwa returned and resumed rehearsals of *Saint Lwanga*, it must have seemed to some in the Muslim military hier-

archy that, by offering a stage piece on the slaughter of Christians, he was engaging in subversion. In early March 1977, Kawadwa was dragged by armed officers of the SRB from the greenroom of the National Theatre, of which he had been the Artistic Director. Some days later his body, with those of five members of the *Saint Lwanga* cast, was found mutilated and charred in a forest outside Kampala.

It will probably never be known why Kawadwa's death was ordered; whether because of his theatre work or because, having travelled abroad, he was therefore suspected of having made contact with anti-Amin organisations. Even more obscure are the reasons for the disappearances in the following July: of Dan Kintu, who had succeeded Kawadwa as Artistic Director of the National Theatre; of John Sebuliba, an Under-secretary in the Ministry of Culture; and of playwright John Male. All that is known is that Male's *The Empty Room* had that evening been given its premiere performance before a large audience in Kampala and may have been interpreted as in some way offensive to the person of the President. Several months later, Lieutenant Stephen Mutengo, who claimed to have had a part in the disposal of the bodies, reported from refuge in Kenya that the three men had been taken from the National Theatre to an Army barracks in Bombo, tried *in camera*, and executed on 23 July 1977.

It should be noted that musicians, as well as actors, writers, and directors, have been murdered by the security agencies. Even Amin's own favoured Scottish Pipers, all from the Acholi region in northern Uganda, and the Director of the Police Band, Ahmed Oduka, may be found in the catalogue of the dead.

The exiled

If, as Amnesty International estimated (*Human Rights in Uganda*, 1978), some 50,000 to 300,000 Ugandans were killed during the eight years of Amin's rule, several thousands reluctantly sought asylum outside the country, including a number of prominent theatre people. Of these, perhaps the best known is the actor-playwright Robert Serumaga, who managed to continue working in Uganda, both as a theatre producer and as a senior corporation executive, until comparatively recently. Having trained as an economist in Dublin, free-lanced as a broadcaster in London, acted

on stage and television in Ireland and Britain, and published a novel and a full-length play by the age of thirty, Serumaga returned to East Africa as the Sales Manager of the Uganda Company's Motor Vehicle Division. He soon joined Kawadwa, Kiyingi, poet and actor David Rubadiri, actress Rose Mbowa, and director Elizabeth Keeble in organising Theatre Ltd, a commercial theatre venture. Serumaga's expansive personality came so to dominate Theatre Ltd that by 1971 his colleagues had all departed to work on other stage projects. Serumaga set about reconstituting the company, recruiting inexperienced school-leavers and offering them an intensive programme of training and performance deeply informed by the techniques of Stanislavski, Grotowski, and Artaud. He renamed the group 'Abafumi' ('The Storytellers') and with it toured his productions of *Majangwa* and *Renga Moi* ('Red Warrior') to Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Serumaga's role in Ugandan theatre has been significantly different from that of Kawadwa. While both writers have been noted for the proficiency and sophistication of their productions, they have appealed to separate constituencies. Serumaga's dramaturgy is complex; his dialogue is intricate and condensed; and his imagery is oblique, rendering much of his later work inaccessible to large portions of Kawadwa's popular audience. And while both have been identifiable as Baganda, Roman Catholics, and monarchists, there is a Nietzscheanism in Serumaga wholly alien to the more democratic spirit of *Makula ga Kulabako*, in which a peasant dancer wins the affections of a princess. In Serumaga's novel, *Return to the Shadows*, set amidst the civil disturbances of 1966, and in his plays – *A Play* (1967) *The Elephants* (1969), *Majangwa* (1971), *Renga Moi* (1972), and *Amanyakiriti* ('The Flame Tree', 1977) – a heroic protagonist offers his special gifts for the preservation and renewal of a society which, once saved, turns upon and destroys him. The special man must either submit to the savagery of the mob or retreat into contemplative detachment: '... let fate run its course, get a small area of safety for yourself and hold on to it. The world beyond, its sufferings and its glories, are only the macabre orchestrations of a band of inherently imperfect men' (*Return to the Shadows*).

Like many in Buganda, Serumaga warmly received the coup of 1971, especially as Amin was

quick to request the return from Britain of the body of the Kabaka, who died in exile. Serumaga produced a feature film in late 1971 which not only documented the traditional burial of the Kabaka, but celebrated Amin and his apparently populist coup. The film was screened at Kampala's Neeta Cinema and broadcast countless times on Uganda Television. But, chilled by the death of Kawadwa and discouraged by the loss of their audience, who feared that the scenes of murder, pillage, and cannibalism in *Amanyakiriti* would be interpreted as an attack on Amin's army, Serumaga and 'Abafumi' departed for Nairobi in 1977. Certainly, Serumaga's intellectual posture of disengagement has not always been maintained in his public life. On 19 February 1979, it was reported from East Africa that Serumaga had been arrested by Kenyan police near the border with Uganda. Having just established its moral credentials by releasing the detained novelist and playwright Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the new government of Kenya was clearly loath to acquire another star detainee, and Serumaga was released within days. Unlike Ngugi, however, Serumaga's arrest was probably quite unrelated to his art. A dispatch from Nairobi (*Guardian*, 19 March 1979) suggests that, as a prominent member of the Uganda Nationalists, Serumaga's future may well lie more in the political than in the theatrical hippodrome.

Nairobi has also become the home of refugee playwright John Ruganda, who, unlike Kawadwa and Serumaga, is from the Toro region. Ruganda's plays, less popular in appeal than Kawadwa's and less adventurous than Serumaga's, have been published and staged widely. His *Covenant with Death* (1967) and *The Burdens* (1972) explore the consequences of personal corruption and violation of tradition. *Black Mamba* (1972), produced recently on the BBC World Service, reflects the official puritanism of Amin's early years, during which prostitution and mini-skirts were regularly excoriated in Presidential pronouncements. Ruganda was compelled to leave Uganda secretly in 1973, and has since contributed greatly to the development of Kenyan theatre, long dominated by the expatriate and settler aesthetic.

Also exiled in Kenya have been David Rubadiri, the poet and former diplomat who distinguished himself in several Kampala stage productions, and Okot p'Bitek, author of the dramatic verse monologues, *The Song of Lawino* and *The Song of*

Ocol. The Song of Lawino has remained for more than a decade the most popular and influential work of indigenous imaginative writing in East Africa. Lawino is an unlettered village girl whose educated husband, Ocol, has adopted the Westernised ways of the new bourgeoisie and an urban contempt for the rural and the traditional. In her novel-length, free-verse 'song', Lawino assails, with wit, passion, and bitterness, Ocol's shallow posturing and mean arrogance, reaffirming the dignity of tradition, labour, and womanhood. When Okot's English translation of *Lawino* was published in 1966, it was an immediate success, particularly with students, whose dissatisfaction with the European orientation of their education was beginning to find voice. But the bold criticisms of Ugandan political life offered by Lawino and by successive 'singers' of Okot's narratives, was less well received by some members of the governing Ugandan People's Congress. In late 1968, Okot, the first African Director of the National Theatre And Cultural Centre, was dismissed from his post and narrowly avoided arrest by fleeing to Kenya. On a brief visit in 1976 to his home in the Acholi district, Okot was openly threatened by Amin during a public ceremony in Gulu and had to escape overland to Kenya by cover of night. Another exiled northerner, the novelist and playwright Okello Oculi, spent a number of years in the United States before accepting a university appointment in Nigeria, where Rubadiri and Okot have recently taken up academic posts.

The former senior civil servant Erisa Kironde, author of several one-act plays and now an official of UNESCO, is also in Nigeria. His *Briefly Yours* (1976) is a strongly royalist interpretation of the events which led to the first deportation of Kabaka Mutesa II, in 1953, on the orders of the Governor,

Sir Andrew Cohen. In its concern with the past this short play is typical of much Ugandan writing and theatre, both at home and in exile, under Amin. Because his regime always lacked programme, ideology, and coherence and was dominated by people heretofore unknown in political and administrative life, artists and intellectuals have often dwelt upon the state of things before the coup.

Mention should also be made of the National Theatre's former Technical Director, Mohindra Popat, whose innovative scenic and lighting designs left their imprint on a decade of Ugandan theatre. Although a citizen, born in Uganda, Popat was expelled in 1972, with 50,000 other members of the Asian community.

The survivors

Right up to the end, modest productions continued to be mounted in schools and colleges throughout the country, although producers tended to select innocuous domestic melodramas, unambiguous moralities, and older scripts which had been offered previously without attracting official censure. Of these last, broadcaster Cosmo Warugaba's *Omuhiigo* ('The Great Hunt'), first staged in 1969, was revived by Theatre African in Kampala. A brisk musical, set in a hill village in Warugaba's Ankole district, *Omuhiigo* suggests that misfortune may be countered by both perseverance and traditional magic. A malign and gluttonous bull buffalo, whose rampages have devastated the fields of a subsistence farmer, is hunted and killed, with the blessings of the local diviner. The play ends in a celebratory feasting scene in which the beast is himself consumed. Even the simplest tale can seem Aesopian in times of oppression. □